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Pope Case Reminds Britons Of Unsolved Bulgarian Crime

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LONDON, Dec. 29 — On Sept. 7, 1978, a Bulgarian playwright named Georgi I. Markov was walking in the Aldwych, a street near the offices of the BBC World Service, where he worked as a broadcaster.

Suddenly, in the midst of rush-hour crowds of pedestrians and of bystanders waiting at bus stops, a man thrust an umbrella into the back of Mr. Markov's right thigh, then murmured his apologies and leaped into a taxi. At the time the incident seemed harmless enough. But the next day the Bulgarian discovered what a friend called "an angry red spot" on his leg and felt ill. Four days later he died.

'A Few Hard Facts'

Mr. Markov, who also worked as a freelance journalist for Radio Free Europe, the American-backed station broadcasting to Warsaw Pact countries, claimed on his deathbed that he had been murdered by Bulgarian secret agents. And the following January, a coroner ruled that he had been killed by a powerful poison — ricin, derived from the castor-oil plant — secreted from a platinum pellet the size of a pinhead. The pellet appeared to have been fired from the umbrella.

The attacker has never been found, and British officials never accused the Bulgarian Government of complicity in the killing.

In recent weeks, however, the incident has been much discussed here because of allegations that Bulgarians were involved in the attempt on the life of Pope John Paul II by Mehmet Ali Agca in 1981.

Intelligence and other officials here are not yet convinced by the evidence made public in Italy; one said that "I would like to see a few hard facts." But their curiosity has nonetheless been piqued.

Neither the British nor other Western European officials consider the Bulgarian secret service to be particularly active. With only 8.9 million people, Bulgaria is the least populous Warsaw Pact nation and one of the poorer ones, and its foreign policy — unlike Rumania's, for instance — is very closely tied to that of the Soviet Union.

"Generally speaking," one diplomat said, "I would say that East German and Czech agents are far more active in the West than Bulgarian agents. We see only a few isolated incidents in which the Bulgarians appear to have played a role, although some of them attract quite widespread publicity. I have serious doubts whether the Soviets, if they wanted to involve themselves in major international incidents, would willingly choose the Bulgarians as their instruments, and I am quite sure that the Bulgarians would not act on their own."